Gunston Classics

CLUSTERING AROUND YOUNG BINGO

P.G. WODEHOUSE

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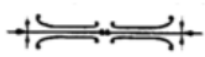
BERTIE WOOSTER



SHORT STORIES

Clustering Round Young Bingo

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I blotted the last page of my manuscript and sank back, feeling more or less of a spent force. After incredible sweat of the old brow the thing seemed to be in pretty fair shape, and I was just reading it through and debating whether to bung in another paragraph at the end, when there was a tap at the door and Jeeves appeared.

"Mrs. Travers, sir, on the telephone."

"Oh?" I said. Preoccupied, don't you know.

"Yes, sir. She presents her compliments and would be glad to know what progress you have made with the article which you are writing for her."

"Jeeves, can I mention men's knee-length underclothing in a woman's paper?"

"No, sir."

"Then tell her it's finished."

"Very good, sir."

"And, Jeeves, when you're through, come back. I want you to cast your eye over this effort and give it the OK"

My Aunt Dahlia, who runs a woman's paper called *Milady's Boudoir*, had recently backed me into a corner and made me promise to write her a few authoritative words for her "Husbands and Brothers" page on "What the Well-Dressed Man is Wearing." I believe in encouraging aunts, when deserving; and, as there are many worse eggs than her knocking about the metrop. I had consented blithely. But I give you my honest word that if I had had the foggiest notion of what I was letting myself in for, not even a nephew's devotion would have kept me from giving her the raspberry. A deuce of a job it had been, taxing the physique to the utmost. I don't wonder now that all these author blokes have bald heads and faces like birds who have suffered.

"Jeeves," I said, when he came back, "you don't read a paper called *Milady's Boudoir* by any chance, do you?"

"No, sir. The periodical has not come to my notice."

"Well, spring sixpence on it next week, because this article will appear in it. Wooster on the well-dressed man, don't you know."

"Indeed, sir?"

"Yes, indeed, Jeeves. I've rather extended myself over this little bijou. There's a bit about socks that I think you will like."

He took the manuscript, brooded over it, and smiled a gentle, approving smile.

"The sock passage is quite in the proper vein, sir," he said.

"Well expressed, what?"

"Extremely, sir."

I watched him narrowly as he read on, and, as I was expecting, what you might call the love-light suddenly died out of his eyes. I braced myself for an unpleasant scene.

"Come to the bit about soft silk shirts for evening wear?" I asked, carelessly.

"Yes, sir," said Jeeves, in a low, cold voice, as if he had been bitten in the leg by a personal friend. "And if I may be pardoned for saying so—"

"You don't like it?"

"No, sir. I do not. Soft silk shirts with evening costume are not worn, sir."

"Jeeves," I said, looking the blighter diametrically in the centre of the eyeball, "they're dashed well going to be. I may as well tell you now that I have ordered a dozen of those shirtings from Peabody and Simms, and it's no good looking like that, because I am jolly well adamant."

"If I might—"

"No, Jeeves," I said, raising my hand, "argument is useless. Nobody has a greater respect than I have for your judgment in socks, in ties, and—I will go farther—in spats; but when it comes to evening shirts your nerve seems to fail you. You have no vision. You are prejudiced and reactionary. Hidebound is the word that suggests itself. It may interest you to learn that when I was at Le Touquet the Prince of Wales buzzed into the Casino one night with soft silk shirt complete."

"His Royal Highness, sir, may permit himself a certain licence which in your own case—"

"No, Jeeves," I said, firmly, "it's no use. When we Woosters are adamant, we are—well, adamant, if you know what I mean."

"Very good, sir."

I could see the man was wounded, and, of course, the whole episode had been extremely jarring and unpleasant; but these things have to be gone through. Is one a serf or isn't one? That's what it all boils down to. Having made my point, I changed the subject.

"Well, that's that," I said. "We now approach another topic. Do you know any housemaids, Jeeves?"

"Housemaids, sir?"

"Come, come, Jeeves, you know what housemaids are. Females who get housemaid's knee."

"Are you requiring a housemaid, sir?"

"No, but Mr. Little is. I met him at the club a couple of days ago, and he told me that Mrs. Little is offering rich rewards to anybody who will find her one guaranteed to go light on the china."

"Indeed, sir?"

"Yes. The one now in office apparently runs through the objets d'art like a typhoon, simoom, or sirocco. So if you know any—"

"I know a great many, sir. Some intimately, others mere acquaintances."

"Well, start digging round among the old pals. And now the hat, the stick, and other necessaries. I must be getting along and handing in this article."

The offices of *Milady's Boudoir* were in one of those rummy streets in the Covent Garden neighbourhood; and I had just got to the door, after wading through a deep topdressing of old cabbages and tomatoes, when who should come out but Mrs. Little. She greeted me with the warmth due to the old family friend, in spite of the fact that I hadn't been round to the house for a goodish while.

"Whatever are you doing in these parts, Bertie? I thought you never came east of Leicester Square."

"I've come to deliver an article of sorts which my Aunt Dahlia asked me to write. She edits a species of journal up those stairs. *Milady's Boudoir*."

"What a coincidence! I have just promised to write an article for her, too."

“Don’t you do it,” I said, earnestly. “You’ve simply no notion what a ghastly labour—Oh, but, of course, I was forgetting. You’re used to it, what?”

Silly of me to have talked like that. Young Bingo Little, if you remember, had married the famous female novelist, Rosie M. Banks, author of some of the most pronounced and widely-read tripe ever put on the market. Naturally a mere article would be pie for her.

“No, I don’t think it will give me much trouble,” she said. “Your aunt has suggested a most delightful subject.”

“That’s good. By the way, I spoke to my man Jeeves about getting you a housemaid. He knows all the hummers.”

“Thank you so much. Oh, are you doing anything tomorrow night?”

“Not a thing.”

“Then do come and dine with us. Your aunt is coming, and hopes to bring your uncle. I am looking forward to meeting him.”

“Thanks. Delighted.”

I meant it, too. The Little household may be weak on housemaids, but it is right there when it comes to cooks. Somewhere or other some time

ago Bingo's missus managed to dig up a Frenchman of the most extraordinary vim and skill. A most amazing Johnnie who dishes a wicked ragoût. Old Bingo has put on at least ten pounds in weight since this fellow Anatole arrived in the home.

"At eight, then."

"Right. Thanks ever so much."

She popped off, and I went upstairs to hand in my copy, as we boys of the Press call it. I found Aunt Dahlia immersed to the gills in papers of all descriptions.

I am not much of a lad for my relatives as a general thing, but I've always been very pally with Aunt Dahlia. She married my Uncle Thomas—between ourselves a bit of a squirt—the year Bluebottle won the Cambridgeshire; and they hadn't got halfway down the aisle before I was saying to myself, "That woman is much too good for the old bird." Aunt Dahlia is a large, genial soul, the sort you see in dozens on the hunting-field. As a matter of fact, until she married Uncle Thomas, she put in most of her time on horseback; but he won't live in the country, so nowadays she expends her energy on this paper of hers.

She came to the surface as I entered, and flung a cheery book at my head.

"Hullo, Bertle! I say, have you really finished that article?"

"To the last comma."

"Good boy! My gosh, I'll bet it's rotten."

"On the contrary, it is extremely hot stuff, and most of it approved by Jeeves, what's more. The bit about soft silk shirts got in amongst him a trifle; but you can take it from me, Aunt Dahlia, that they are the latest yodel and will be much seen at first nights and other occasions where Society assembles."

"Your man Jeeves," said Aunt Dahlia, flinging the article into a basket and skewering a few loose pieces of paper on a sort of meat-hook, "is a washout, and you can tell him I said so."

"Oh, come," I said. "He may not be sound on shirtings—"

"I'm not referring to that. As long as a week ago I asked him to get me a cook, and he hasn't found one yet."

"Great Scott! Is Jeeves a domestic employment agency? Mrs. Little wants him to find her a housemaid. I met her outside. She tells me she's doing something for you."

"Yes, thank goodness. I'm relying on it to bump the circulation up a bit. I can't read her stuff myself, but women love it. Her name on the cover will mean a lot. And we need it."

"Paper not doing well?"

"It's doing all right really, but it's got to be a slow job building up a circulation."

"I suppose so."

"I can get Tom to see that in his lucid moments," said Aunt Dahlia, skewering a few more papers. "But just at present the poor fathead has got one of his pessimistic spells. It's entirely due to that mechanic who calls herself a cook. A few more of her alleged dinners, and Tom will refuse to go on paying the printers' bills."

"You don't mean that!"

"I do mean it. There was what she called a *ris de veau à la financière* last night which made him talk for three-quarters of an hour about good money going to waste and nothing to show for it."

I quite understood, and I was dashed sorry for her. My Uncle Thomas is a cove who made a colossal pile of money out in the East, but in doing so put his digestion on the blink. This has made him a tricky proposition to handle. Many a time I've lunched with him and found him

perfectly chirpy up to the fish, only to have him turn blue on me well before the cheese.

Who was that lad they used to try to make me read at Oxford? Ship—Shop—Schopenhauer. That's the name. A grouch of the most pronounced description. Well, Uncle Thomas, when his gastric juices have been giving him the elbow, can make Schopenhauer look like Pollyanna. And the worst of it is, from Aunt Dahlia's point of view, that on these occasions he always seems to think he's on the brink of ruin and wants to start to economize.

"Pretty tough," I said. "Well, anyway, he'll get one good dinner tomorrow night at the Littles'."

"Can you guarantee that, Bertie?" asked Aunt Dahlia, earnestly. "I simply daren't risk unleashing him on anything at all wonky."

"They've got a marvellous cook. I haven't been round there for some time, but unless he's lost his form of two months ago Uncle Thomas is going to have the treat of a lifetime."

"It'll only make it all the worse for him, coming back to our steak-incinerator," said Aunt Dahlia, a bit on the Schopenhauer side herself.

The little nest where Bingo and his bride had settled themselves was up in St. John's Wood; one of those rather jolly houses with a bit of garden. When I got there on the following night, I found that I was the last to weigh in. Aunt Dahlia was chatting with Rosie in a corner, while Uncle Thomas, standing by the mantelpiece with Bingo, sucked down a cocktail in a frowning, suspicious sort of manner, rather like a chappie having a short snort before dining with the Borgias; as if he were saying to himself that, even if this particular cocktail wasn't poisoned, he was bound to cop it later on.

Well, I hadn't expected anything in the nature of beaming joie de vivre from Uncle Thomas, so I didn't pay much attention to him. What did surprise me was the extraordinary gloom of young Bingo. You may say what you like against Bingo, but nobody has ever found him a depressing host. Why, many a time in the days of his bachelorhood I've known him to start throwing bread before the soup course. Yet now he and Uncle Thomas were a pair. He looked haggard and careworn, like a Borgia who had suddenly remembered that he had forgotten to shove cyanide in the consommé, and the dinner-gong due any moment.

And the mystery wasn't helped at all by the one remark he made to me before conversation became general. As he poured out my cocktail, he suddenly bent forward.

"Bertie," he whispered, in a nasty, feverish manner, "I want to see you. Life and death matter. Be in tomorrow morning."

That was all. Immediately after that the starting-gun went and we toddled down to the festive. And from that moment, I'm bound to say, in the superior interest of the proceedings he rather faded out of my mind. For good old Anatole, braced presumably by the fact of there being guests, had absolutely surpassed himself.

I am not a man who speaks hastily in these matters. I weigh my words. And I say again that Anatole had surpassed himself. It was as good a dinner as I have ever absorbed, and it revived Uncle Thomas like a watered flower. As we sat down he was saying some things about the Government which they wouldn't have cared to hear. With the *consommé pâté d'Italie* he said but what could you expect nowadays? With the *paupiettes de sole à la princesse* he admitted rather decently that the Government couldn't be held responsible for the rotten weather, anyway.

And shortly after the *caneton Aylesbury à la broche* he was practically giving the lads the benefit of his wholehearted support.

And all the time young Bingo looking like an owl with a secret sorrow. Rummy!

I thought about it a good deal as I walked home, and I was hoping he wouldn't roll round with his hard-luck story too early in the morning. He had the air of one who intends to charge in at about six-thirty.

Jeeves was waiting up for me when I got back.

"A pleasant dinner, sir?" he said.

"Magnificent, Jeeves."

"I am glad to hear that, sir. Mr. George Travers rang up on the telephone shortly after you had left. He was extremely desirous that you should join him at Harrogate, sir. He leaves for that town by an early train tomorrow."

My Uncle George is a festive old bird who has made a habit for years of doing himself a dashed sight too well, with the result that he's always got Harrogate or Buxton hanging over him like the sword of what's-his-name. And he hates going there alone.

"It can't be done," I said. Uncle George is bad enough in London, and I wasn't going to let

myself be cooped up with him in one of these cure-places.

"He was extremely urgent, sir."

"No, Jeeves," I said, firmly. "I am always anxious to oblige, but Uncle George—no, no! I mean to say, what?"

"Very good, sir," said Jeeves.

It was a pleasure to hear the way he said it. Docile the man was becoming, absolutely docile. It just showed that I had been right in putting my foot down about those shirts.

When Bingo showed up next morning, I had had breakfast and was all ready for him. Jeeves shot him into the presence, and he sat down on the bed.

"Good morning, Bertie," said young Bingo.

"Good morning, old thing," I replied, courteously.

"Don't go, Jeeves," said young Bingo hollowly. "Wait."

"Sir?"

"Remain. Stay. Cluster round. I shall need you."

"Very good, sir."

Bingo lit a cigarette and frowned bleakly at the wallpaper.

"Bertie," he said, "the most frightful calamity has occurred. Unless something is done, and done right speedily, my social prestige is doomed, my self-respect will be obliterated, my name will be mud, and I shall not dare to show my face in the West-end of London again."

"My aunt!" I cried, deeply impressed.

"Exactly," said young Bingo, with a hollow laugh. "You have put it in a nutshell. The whole trouble is due to your blasted aunt."

"Which blasted aunt? Specify, old thing. I have so many."

"Mrs. Travers. The one who runs that infernal paper."

"Oh, no, dash it, old man," I protested. "She's the only decent aunt I've got. Jeeves, you will bear me out in this?"

"Such has always been my impression, I must confess, sir."

"Well, get rid of it, then," said young Bingo. "The woman is a menace to society, a home-wrecker, and a pest. Do you know what she's done? She's got Rosie to write an article for that rag of hers."

"I know that."

"Yes, but you don't know what it's about."

"No. She only told me Aunt Dahlia had given her a splendid idea for the thing."

"It's about me!"

"You?"

"Yes, me! Me! And do you know what it's called? It is called 'How I Keep the Love of My Husband-Baby.'"

"My what?"

"Husband-baby!"

"What's a husband-baby?"

"I am, apparently," said young Bingo, with much bitterness. "I am also, according to this article, a lot of other things which I have too much sense of decency to repeat even to an old friend. This beastly composition, in short, is one of those things they call 'human interest stories'; one of those intimate revelations of married life over which the female public loves to gloat; all about Rosie and me and what she does when I come home cross, and so on. I tell you, Bertie, I am still blushing all over at the recollection of something she says in paragraph two."

"What?"

"I decline to tell you. But you can take it from me that it's the edge. Nobody could be fonder of Rosie than I am, but—dear, sensible girl as she is in ordinary life—the moment she gets in front of a dictating-machine she becomes absolutely maudlin. Bertie, that article must not appear!"

"But—"

"If it does I shall have to resign from my clubs, grow a beard, and become a hermit. I shall not be able to face the world."

"Aren't you pitching it a bit strong, old lad?" I said. "Jeeves, don't you think he's pitching it a bit strong?"

"Well, sir—"

"I am pitching it feebly," said young Bingo, earnestly. "You haven't heard the thing. I have. Rosie shoved the cylinder on the dictating-machine last night before dinner, and it was grisly to hear the instrument croaking out those awful sentences. If that article appears I shall be kidded to death by every pal I've got. Bertie," he said, his voice sinking to a hoarse whisper, "you have about as much imagination as a warthog, but surely even you can picture to yourself what Jimmy Bowles and Tuppy Rogers, to name only

two, will say when they see me referred to in print as 'half god, half prattling, mischievous child'?"

I jolly well could.

"She doesn't say that?" I gasped.

"She certainly does. And when I tell you that I selected that particular quotation because it's about the only one I can stand hearing spoken, you will realize what I'm up against."

I picked at the coverlet. I had been a pal of Bingo's for many years, and we Woosters stand by our pals.

"Jeeves," I said, "you have heard?"

"Yes, sir."

"The position is serious."

"Yes, sir."

"We must cluster round."

"Yes, sir."

"Does anything suggest itself to you?"

"Yes, sir."

"What! You don't really mean that?"

"Yes, sir."

"Bingo," I said, "the sun is still shining. Something suggests itself to Jeeves."

"Jeeves," said young Bingo in a quivering voice, "if you see me through this fearful crisis,

ask of me what you will even unto half my kingdom."

"The matter," said Jeeves, "fits in very nicely, sir, with another mission which was entrusted to me this morning."

"What do you mean?"

"Mrs. Travers rang me up on the telephone shortly before I brought you your tea, sir, and was most urgent that I should endeavour to persuade Mr. Little's cook to leave Mr. Little's service and join her staff. It appears that Mr. Travers was fascinated by the man's ability, sir, and talked far into the night of his astonishing gifts."

Young Bingo uttered a frightful cry of agony.

"What! Is that—that buzzard trying to pinch our cook?"

"Yes, sir."

"After eating our bread and salt, dammit?"

"I fear, sir," sighed Jeeves, "that when it comes to a matter of cooks ladies have but a rudimentary sense of morality."

"Half a second, Bingo," I said, as the fellow seemed about to plunge into something of an oration. "How does this fit in with the other thing, Jeeves?"

“Well, sir, it has been my experience that no lady can ever forgive another lady for taking a really good cook away from her. I am convinced that, if I am able to accomplish the mission which Mrs. Travers entrusted to me, an instant breach of cordial relations must inevitably ensue. Mrs. Little will, I feel certain, be so aggrieved with Mrs. Travers that she will decline to contribute to her paper. We shall therefore not only bring happiness to Mr. Travers, but also suppress the article. Thus killing two birds with one stone, if I may use the expression, sir.”

“Certainly you may use the expression, Jeeves,” I said, cordially. “And I may add that in my opinion this is one of your best and ripest.”

“Yes, but I say, you know,” bleated young Bingo. “I mean to say—old Anatole, I mean—what I’m driving at is that he’s a cook in a million.”

“You poor chump, if he wasn’t there would be no point in the scheme.”

“Yes, but what I mean—I shall miss him, you know. Miss him fearfully.”

“Good heavens!” I cried. “Don’t tell me that you are thinking of your tummy in a crisis like this?”

Bingo sighed heavily.

“Oh, all right,” he said. “I suppose it’s a case of the surgeon’s knife. All right, Jeeves, you may carry on. Yes, carry on, Jeeves. Yes, yes, Jeeves, carry on. I’ll look in tomorrow morning and hear what you have to report.”

And with bowed head young Bingo biffed off.

He was bright and early next morning. In fact, he turned up at such an indecent hour that Jeeves very properly refused to allow him to break in on my slumbers.

By the time I was awake and receiving, he and Jeeves had had a heart-to-heart chat in the kitchen; and when Bingo eventually crept into my room I could see by the look on his face that something had gone wrong.

“It’s all off,” he said, slumping down on the bed.

“Off?”

“Yes; that cook-pinching business. Jeeves tells me he saw Anatole last night, and Anatole refused to leave.”

“But surely Aunt Dahlia had the sense to offer him more than he was getting with you?”

"The sky was the limit, as far as she was concerned. Nevertheless, he refused to skid. It seems he's in love with our parlourmaid."

"But you haven't got a parlourmaid."

"We have got a parlourmaid."

"I've never seen her. A sort of bloke who looked like a provincial undertaker waited at table the night before last."

"That was the local greengrocer, who comes to help out when desired. The parlourmaid is away on her holiday—or was till last night. She returned about ten minutes before Jeeves made his call, and Anatole, I take it, was in such a state of elation and devotion and whatnot on seeing her again that the contents of the Mint wouldn't have bribed him to part from her."

"But look here, Bingo," I said, "this is all rot. I see the solution right off. I'm surprised that a bloke of Jeeves's mentality overlooked it. Aunt Dahlia must engage the parlourmaid as well as Anatole. Then they won't be parted."

"I thought of that, too. Naturally."

"I bet you didn't."

"I certainly did."

"Well, what's wrong with the scheme?"

“It can’t be worked. If your aunt engaged our parlourmaid she would have to sack her own, wouldn’t she?”

“Well?”

“Well, if she sacks her parlourmaid, it will mean that the chauffeur will quit. He’s in love with her.”

“With my aunt?”

“No, with the parlourmaid. And apparently he’s the only chauffeur your uncle has ever found who drives carefully enough for him.”

I gave it up. I had never imagined before that life below stairs was so frightfully mixed up with what these coves call the sex complex. The personnel of domestic staffs seemed to pair off like characters in a musical comedy.

“Oh!” I said. “Well, that being so, we do seem to be more or less stymied. That article will have to appear after all, what?”

“No, it won’t.”

“Has Jeeves thought of another scheme?”

“No, but I have.” Bingo bent forward and patted my knee affectionately. “Look here, Bertie,” he said, “you and I were at school together. You’ll admit that?”

“Yes, but—”

"And you're a fellow who never lets a pal down. That's well known, isn't it?"

"Yes, but listen, Bingo—"

"You'll cluster round. Of course you will. As if," said Bingo with a scornful laugh, "I ever doubted it! You won't let an old schoolfriend down in his hour of need. Not you. Not Bertie Wooster. No, no!"

"Yes, but just one moment—"

Bingo massaged my shoulder soothingly.

"It's all settled, Bertie, old man. Nothing for you to worry about. Nothing whatever. I see now that we made a mistake in ever trying to tackle this job in Jeeves's silly, roundabout way. Much better to charge straight ahead without any of that finesse and fooling about. This afternoon I'm going to take Rosie to a matinée. I shall leave the window of her study open, and when we have got well away you will climb in, pinch the cylinder, and pop off again. It's absurdly simple."

"Yes, but half a second—"

"I know what you're going to say," said Bingo, raising his hand. "How are you to find the cylinder? That's what's bothering you, isn't it? Well, it'll be quite easy. Not a chance of a mistake. The thing is in the top left-hand drawer of the

desk, and the drawer will be left unlocked because Rosie's stenographer is to come round at four o'clock and type the thing."

"Now listen, Bingo," I said. "I'm frightfully sorry for you and all that, but I must firmly draw the line at burglary. I—"

He gazed at me, astonished and hurt.

"Is this Bertie Wooster speaking?" he said in a low voice.

"Yes, it is!"

"But, Bertie," he said gently, "we agreed that you were at school with me."

"I don't care."

"At school, Bertie. The dear old school."

"I don't care. I will not—"

"Bertie!"

"I will not—"

"Bertie!"

"No!"

"Bertie!"

"Oh, all right," I said.

"There," said young Bingo, patting me on the shoulder, "spoke the true Bertram Wooster!"

I don't know if it has ever occurred to you, but to the thoughtful cove there is something dashed

reassuring in all the reports of burglaries you read in the papers. I mean, if you're keen on Great Britain maintaining her prestige and all that. I mean, there can't be much wrong with the morale of a country whose sons go in to such a large extent for housebreaking, because you can take it from me that the job requires a nerve of the most cast-iron description. I suppose I was walking up and down in front of that house for half an hour before I could bring myself to dash in at the front gate and slide round to the side where the study-window was. And even then I stood for about ten minutes cowering against the wall and listening for police-whistles.

Eventually, however, I braced myself up and got to business. The study was on the ground floor and the window was nice and large, and, what is more, wide open. I got the old knee over the sill, gave a jerk which took an inch of skin off my ankle, and hopped down into the room. And there I was, if you follow me.

I stood for a moment, listening. Everything seemed to be all right. I was apparently alone in the world.

In fact, I was so much alone that the atmosphere seemed positively creepy. You know

how it is on these occasions. There was a clock on the mantelpiece that ticked in a slow, shocked sort of way that was dashed unpleasant. And over the clock a large portrait stared at me with a good deal of dislike and suspicion. It was a portrait of somebody's grandfather. Whether he was Rosie's or Bingo's I didn't know, but he was certainly a grandfather. In fact, I wouldn't be prepared to swear that he wasn't a great-grandfather. He was a big, stout old buffer in a high collar that seemed to hurt his neck, for he had drawn his chin back a goodish way and was looking down his nose as much as to say, "*You* made me put this dam' thing on!"

Well, it was only a step to the desk, and nothing between me and it but a brown shaggy rug; so I avoided grandfather's eye and, summoning up the good old bulldog courage of the Woosters, moved forward and started to navigate the rug. And I had hardly taken a step when the southeast corner of it suddenly detached itself from the rest and sat up with a snuffle.

Well, I mean to say, to bear yourself fittingly in the face of an occurrence of this sort you want to be one of those strong, silent, phlegmatic birds who are ready for anything. This type of bloke, I

imagine, would simply have cocked an eye at the rug, said to himself, “Ah, a Pekingese dog, and quite a good one, too!” and started at once to make cordial overtures to the animal in order to win its sympathy and moral support. I suppose I must be one of the neurotic younger generation you read about in the papers nowadays, because it was pretty plain within half a second that I wasn’t strong and I wasn’t phlegmatic. This wouldn’t have mattered so much, but I wasn’t silent either. In the emotion of the moment I let out a sort of sharp yowl and leaped about four feet in a northwesterly direction. And there was a crash that sounded as though somebody had touched off a bomb.

What a female novelist wants with an occasional table in her study containing a vase, two framed photographs, a saucer, a lacquer box, and a jar of potpourri, I don’t know; but that was what Bingo’s Rosie had, and I caught it squarely with my right hip and knocked it endways. It seemed to me for a moment as if the whole world had dissolved into a kind of cataract of glass and china. A few years ago, when I legged it to America to elude my Aunt Agatha, who was out with her hatchet, I remember going to Niagara

and listening to the Falls. They made much the same sort of row, but not so loud.

And at the same instant the dog began to bark.

It was a small dog—the sort of animal from which you would have expected a noise like a squeaking slate-pencil: but it was simply baying. It had retired into a corner, and was leaning against the wall with bulging eyes; and every two seconds it chucked its head back in a kind of pained way and let out another terrific bellow.

Well, I know when I'm licked. I was sorry for Bingo and regretted the necessity of having to let him down; but the time had come, I felt, to shift. "Outside for Bertram!" was the slogan, and I took a running leap at the window and scrambled through.

And there on the path, as if they had been waiting for me by appointment, stood a policeman and a parlourmaid.

It was an embarrassing moment.

"Oh—er—there you are!" I said. And there was what you might call a contemplative silence for a moment.

"I told you I heard something," said the parlourmaid.

The policeman was regarding me in a boiled way.

"What's all this?" he asked.

I smiled in a sort of saintlike manner.

"It's a little hard to explain," I said.

"Yes, it is!" said the policeman.

"I was just—er—just having a look round, you know. Old friend of the family, you understand."

"How did you get in?"

"Through the window. Being an old friend of the family, if you follow me."

"Old friend of the family, are you?"

"Oh, very. Very. Very old. Oh, a very old friend of the family."

"I've never seen him before," said the parlourmaid.

I looked at the girl with positive loathing. How she could have inspired affection in anyone, even a French cook, beat me. Not that she was a bad looking girl, mind you. Not at all. On another and happier occasion I might even have thought her rather pretty. But now she seemed one of the most unpleasant females I had ever encountered.

"No," I said. "You have never seen me before. But I'm an old friend of the family."

"Then why didn't you ring at the front door?"

"I didn't want to give any trouble."

"It's no trouble answering front doors, that being what you're paid for," said the parlourmaid, virtuously. "I've never seen him before in my life," she added, perfectly gratuitously. A horrid girl.

"Well, look here," I said, with an inspiration, "the undertaker knows me."

"What undertaker?"

"The cove who was waiting at table when I dined here the night before last."

"Did the undertaker wait at table on the sixteenth instant?" asked the policeman.

"Of course he didn't," said the parlourmaid.

"Well, he looked like—By Jove, no. I remember now. He was the greengrocer."

"On the sixteenth instant," said the policeman —pompous ass!—"did the greengrocer—?"

"Yes, he did, if you want to know," said the parlourmaid. She seemed disappointed and baffled, like a tigress that sees its prey being sneaked away from it. Then she brightened. "But this fellow could easily have found that out by asking round about."

A perfectly poisonous girl.

"What's your name?" asked the policeman.

"Well, I say, do you mind awfully if I don't give my name, because—"

"Suit yourself. You'll have to tell it to the magistrate."

"Oh, no, I say, dash it!"

"I think you'd better come along."

"But I say, really, you know, I am an old friend of the family. Why, by Jove, now I remember, there's a photograph of me in the drawing-room. Well, I mean, that shows you!"

"If there is," said the policeman.

"I've never seen it," said the parlourmaid.

I absolutely hated this girl.

"You would have seen it if you had done your dusting more conscientiously," I said, severely. And I meant it to sting, by Jove!

"It is not a parlourmaid's place to dust the drawing-room," she sniffed, haughtily.

"No," I said, bitterly. "It seems to be a parlourmaid's place to lurk about and hang about and—er—waste her time fooling about in the garden with policemen who ought to be busy about their duties elsewhere."

"It's a parlourmaid's place to open the front door to visitors. Them that don't come in through windows."

I perceived that I was getting the loser's end of the thing. I tried to be conciliatory.

"My dear old parlourmaid," I said, "don't let us descend to vulgar wrangling. All I'm driving at is that there is a photograph of me in the drawing-room, cared for and dusted by whom I know not; and this photograph will, I think, prove to you that I am an old friend of the family. I fancy so, officer?"

"If it's there," said the man, in a grudging way.

"Oh, it's there all right. Oh, yes, it's there."

"Well, we'll go to the drawing-room and see."

"Spoken like a man, my dear old policeman," I said.

The drawing-room was on the first floor, and the photograph was on the table by the fireplace. Only, if you understand me, it wasn't. What I mean is, there was the fireplace, and there was the table by the fireplace, but, by Jove, not a sign of any photograph of me whatsoever. A photograph of Bingo, yes. A photograph of Bingo's uncle, Lord Bittlesham, right. A photograph of Mrs. Bingo, three-quarter face, with a tender smile on her lips, all present and correct. But of anything resembling Bertram Wooster, not a trace.

"Ho!" said the policeman.

"But, dash it, it was there the night before last."

"Ho!" he said again. "Ho! Ho!" As if he were starting a drinking-chorus in a comic opera, confound him.

Then I got what amounted to the brainwave of a lifetime.

"Who dusts these things?" I said, turning on the parlourmaid.

"I don't."

"I didn't say you did. I said who did."

"Mary. The housemaid, of course."

"Exactly. As I suspected. As I foresaw. Mary, officer, is notoriously the worst smasher in London. There have been complaints about her on all sides. You see what has happened? The wretched girl has broken the glass of my photograph and, not being willing to come forward and admit it in an honest, manly way, has taken the thing off and concealed it somewhere."

"Ho!" said the policeman, still working through the drinking-chorus.

"Well, ask her. Go down and ask her."

“You go down and ask her,” said the policeman to the parlourmaid. “If it’s going to make him any happier.”

The parlourmaid left the room, casting a pestilential glance at me over her shoulder as she went. I’m not sure she didn’t say “Ho!” too. And then there was a bit of a lull. The policeman took up a position with a large beefy back against the door, and I wandered to and fro and hither and yonder.

“What are you playing at?” demanded the policeman.

“Just looking round. They may have moved the thing.”

“Ho!”

And then there was another bit of a lull. And suddenly I found myself by the window, and, by Jove, it was six inches open at the bottom. And the world beyond looked so bright and sunny and —Well, I don’t claim that I am a particularly swift thinker, but once more something seemed to whisper “Outside for Bertram!” I slid my fingers nonchalantly under the sash, gave a hefty heave, and up she came. And the next moment I was in a laurel bush, feeling like the cross which marks the spot where the accident occurred.

A large red face appeared in the window. I got up and skipped lightly to the gate.

"Hi!" shouted the policeman.

"Ho!" I replied, and went forth, moving well.

"This," I said to myself, as I hailed a passing cab and sank back on the cushions, "is the last time I try to do anything for young Bingo!"

These sentiments I expressed in no guarded language to Jeeves when I was back in the old flat with my feet on the mantelpiece, pushing down a soothing whisky-and.

"Never again, Jeeves!" I said. "Never again!"

"Well, sir—"

"No, never again!"

"Well, sir—"

"What do you mean, 'Well, sir'? What are you driving at?"

"Well, sir, Mr. Little is an extremely persistent young gentleman, and yours, if I may say so, sir, is a yielding and obliging nature—"

"You don't think that young Bingo would have the immortal rind to try to get me into some other foul enterprise?

"I should say that it was more than probable, sir."

I removed the dogs swiftly from the mantelpiece, and jumped up, all of a twitter.

"Jeeves, what would you advise?"

"Well, sir, I think a little change of scene would be judicious."

"Do a bolt?"

"Precisely, sir. If I might suggest it, sir, why not change your mind and join Mr. George Travers at Harrogate?"

"Oh, I say, Jeeves!"

"You would be out of what I might describe as the danger zone there, sir."

"Perhaps you're right, Jeeves," I said, thoughtfully. "Yes, possibly you're right. How far is Harrogate from London?"

"Two hundred and six miles, sir."

"Yes, I think you're right. Is there a train this afternoon?"

"Yes, sir. You could catch it quite easily."

"All right, then. Bung a few necessaries in a bag."

"I have already done so, sir."

"Ho!" I said.

It's a rummy thing, but when you come down to it Jeeves is always right. He had tried to cheer me

up at the station by saying that I would not find Harrogate unpleasant, and, by Jove, he was perfectly correct. What I had overlooked, when examining the project, was the fact that I should be in the middle of a bevy of blokes who were taking the cure and I shouldn't be taking it myself. You've no notion what a dashed cosy, satisfying feeling that gives a fellow.

I mean to say, there was old Uncle George, for instance. The medicine-man, having given him the once-over, had ordered him to abstain from all alcoholic liquids, and in addition to tool down the hill to the Royal Pump-Room each morning at eight-thirty and imbibe twelve ounces of warm crescent saline and magnesia. It doesn't sound much, put that way, but I gather from contemporary accounts that it's practically equivalent to getting outside a couple of little old last year's eggs beaten up in seawater. And the thought of Uncle George, who had oppressed me sorely in my childhood, sucking down that stuff and having to hop out of bed at eight-fifteen to do so was extremely grateful and comforting of a morning.

At four in the afternoon he would toddle down the hill again and repeat the process, and at night

we would dine together and I would loll back in my chair, sipping my wine, and listen to him telling me what the stuff had tasted like. In many ways the ideal existence.

I generally managed to fit it in with my engagements to go down and watch him tackle his afternoon dose, for we Woosters are as fond of a laugh as anyone. And it was while I was enjoying the performance in the middle of the second week that I heard my name spoken. And there was Aunt Dahlia.

"Hullo!" I said. "What are you doing here?"

"I came down yesterday with Tom."

"Is Tom taking the cure?" asked Uncle George, looking up hopefully from the hell-brew.

"Yes."

"Are you taking the cure?"

"Yes."

"Ah!" said Uncle George, looking happier than I had seen him for days. He swallowed the last drops, and then, the programme calling for a brisk walk before his massage, left us.

"I shouldn't have thought you would have been able to get away from the paper," I said. "I say," I went on, struck by a pleasing idea. "It hasn't bust up, has it?"

"Bust up? I should say not. A pal of mine is looking after it for me while I'm here. It's right on its feet now. Tom has given me a couple of thousand and says there's more if I want it, and I've been able to buy the serial rights of Lady Bablockhythe's *Frank Recollections of a Long Life*. The hottest stuff, Bertie. Certain to double the circulation and send half the best-known people in London into hysterics for a year."

"Oh!" I said. "Then you're pretty well fixed, what? I mean, what with the *Frank Recollections* and that article of Mrs. Little's."

Aunt Dahlia was drinking something that smelled like a leak in the gas-pipe, and I thought for a moment that it was that that made her twist up a face. But I was wrong.

"Don't mention that woman to me, Bertie!" she said. "One of the worst."

"But I thought you were rather pally."

"No longer. Will you credit it that she positively refuses to let me have that article—"

"What!"

"—purely and simply on account of some fancied grievance she thinks she has against me because her cook left her and came to me."

I couldn't follow this at all.

"Anatole left her?" I said. "But what about the parlourmaid?"

"Pull yourself together, Bertie. You're babbling. What do you mean?"

"Why, I understood—"

"I'll bet you never understood anything in your life." She laid down her empty glass. "Well, that's done!" she said, with relief. "Thank goodness, I'll be able to watch Tom drinking his in a few minutes. It's the only thing that enables me to bear up. Poor old chap, he does hate it so! But I cheer him by telling him it's going to put him in shape for Anatole's cooking. And that, Bertie, is something worth going into training for. A master of his art, that man. Sometimes I'm not altogether surprised that Mrs. Little made such a fuss when he went. But, really, you know, she ought not to mix sentiment with business. She has no right to refuse to let me have that article just because of a private difference. Well, she jolly well can't use it anywhere else, because it was my idea and I have witnesses to prove it. If she tries to sell it to another paper, I'll sue her. And, talking of sewers, it's high time Tom was here to drink his sulphur-water."

"But look here—"

"Oh, by the way, Bertie," said Aunt Dahlia, "I withdraw any harsh expressions I may have used about your man Jeeves. A most capable feller!"

"Jeeves?"

"Yes, he attended to the negotiations. And very well he did it, too. And he hasn't lost by it, you can bet. I saw to that. I'm grateful to him. Why, if Tom gives up a couple of thousand now, practically without a murmur, the imagination reels at what he'll do with Anatole cooking regularly for him. He'll be signing cheques in his sleep."

I got up. Aunt Dahlia pleaded with me to stick around and watch Uncle Tom in action, claiming it to be a sight nobody should miss, but I couldn't wait. I rushed up the hill, left a farewell note for Uncle George, and caught the next train for London.

"Jeeves," I said, when I had washed off the stains of travel, "tell me frankly all about it. Be as frank as Lady Bablockhythe."

"Sir?"

"Never mind if you've not heard of her. Tell me how you worked this binge. The last I heard was that Anatole loved that parlourmaid—goodness

knows why!—so much that he refused to leave her. Well, then?"

"I was somewhat baffled for awhile, I must confess, sir. Then I was materially assisted by a fortunate discovery."

"What was that?"

"I chanced to be chatting with Mrs. Travers's housemaid, sir, and, remembering that Mrs. Little was anxious to obtain a domestic of that description, I asked her if she would consent to leave Mrs. Travers and go at an advanced wage to Mrs. Little. To this she assented, and I saw Mrs. Little and arranged the matter."

"Well? What was the fortunate discovery?"

"That the girl, in a previous situation some little time back, had been a colleague of Anatole, sir. And Anatole, as is the too frequent practice of these Frenchmen, had made love to her. In fact, they were, so I understood it, sir, formally affianced until Anatole disappeared one morning, leaving no address, and passed out of the poor girl's life. You will readily appreciate that this discovery simplified matters considerably. The girl no longer had any affection for Anatole, but the prospect of being under the same roof with

two young persons, both of whom he had led to assume—"

"Great Scott! Yes, I see! It was rather like putting in a ferret to start a rabbit."

"The principle was much the same, sir. Anatole was out of the house and in Mrs. Travers's service within half an hour of the receipt of the information that the young person was about to arrive. A volatile man, sir. Like so many of these Frenchmen."

"Jeeves," I said, "this is genius of a high order."

"It is very good of you to say so, sir."

"What did Mr. Little say about it?"

"He appeared gratified, sir."

"To go into sordid figures, did he—"

"Yes, sir. Twenty pounds. Having been fortunate in his selections at Hurst Park on the previous Saturday."

"My aunt told me that she—"

"Yes, sir. Most generous. Twenty-five pounds."

"Good Lord, Jeeves! You've been coining the stuff!"

"I have added appreciably to my savings, yes, sir. Mrs. Little was good enough to present me with ten pounds for finding her such a satisfactory housemaid. And then there was Mr. Travers—"

"Uncle Thomas?"

"Yes, sir. He also behaved most handsomely, quite independently of Mrs. Travers. Another twenty-five pounds. And Mr. George Travers—"

"Don't tell me that Uncle George gave you something, too! What on earth for?"

"Well, really, sir, I do not quite understand myself. But I received a cheque for ten pounds from him. He seemed to be under the impression that I had been in some way responsible for your joining him at Harrogate, sir."

I gaped at the fellow.

"Well, everybody seems to be doing it," I said, "so I suppose I had better make the thing unanimous. Here's a fiver."

"Why, thank you, sir. This is extremely—"

"It won't seem much compared with these vast sums you've been acquiring."

"Oh, I assure you, sir."

"And I don't know why I'm giving it to you."

"No, sir."

"Still, there it is."

"Thank you very much, sir."

I got up.

"It's pretty late," I said, "but I think I'll dress and go out and have a bite somewhere. I feel like

having a whirl of some kind after two weeks at Harrogate."

"Yes, sir. I will unpack your clothes."

"Oh, Jeeves," I said, "did Peabody and Simms send those soft silk shirts?"

"Yes, sir. I sent them back."

"Sent them back!"

"Yes, sir."

I eyed him for a moment. But I mean to say. I mean, what's the use?

"Oh, all right," I said. "Then lay out one of the gents' stiff-bosomed."

"Very good, sir," said Jeeves.

THE END

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P.G. WODEHOUSE

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